

Will it take **SANCTIONS AGAINST AUSTRALIA**
TO GET US INTO THE BLACK?

This paper is about the problems that are besetting the indigenous art industry of this country. In particular, it focuses on the lack of the support and direction that is needed to advance our art to formats that would make possible mass circulation and wider audiences. I would like to share my experiences with you, to provide an insight into our industry as a starting point from which to formulate a better future. But I must do this in our way, starting at a certain point in time and slowly working forward. Historically, this is how the *indigenous* Australian has constructed dialogue, utilising concepts of past, present and future.

Firstly then, I should introduce myself. I was born on the now defunct Charleville Aboriginal Reserve, in the deserts of south west Queensland, some six hundred miles west of Brisbane. The community was made up of local Bidgeri, Koomu, and Nguri clanspeople. It was not my ancestral homeland, but it was not far from some of both my mother's country (50 miles south of Charleville) and my father's country (the Chesterson Ranges, 80 miles to the east). I was born into third-world conditions – no running water (we had to buy it), no electricity (we used a wood stove), carbide lights, kerosene refrigerator, and no sewage (we had to shit in a tin and bury it). The house was made of corrugated iron, assorted nails, and tree trunks that were cut from the bush. For our food we ate freshwater jewfish, crayfish, swans, emus, goannas, and rabbits, amongst other foods introduced by the Europeans. The harsh conditions were matched by a harsh environment and harsh climate. Generally though, these times are remembered fondly.

My ancestry makes me a descendant of the Kamilaroi nation, Gunnedah of the Namoi

River in north west New South Wales; the Koomus of the Nebine Creek to the Warrego River area, including Cunnamulla; the Koreng Gorengs of the Northern Burnett district including that section of the Great Dividing Range; the famous Jimans of the Dawson River; and the Nguris of the Chesterson Range across to the Carnarvon Gorge.

My early childhood was spent at Charleville and Mitchell. Although I started school in Darwin, most of my schooling was in Mitchell and Dalby. On leaving school, I travelled and worked in different parts of Australia – Darwin, Redfern, and the Coffs Harbour region. I have spent the last ten years in Brisbane, where I find the countryside and climate suits me admirably. In fact it is fair to say that I have a love relationship with the place.

Each of these places gave me varying experiences to draw upon. The place that has given me the most would have to be Redfern. It was here that I lived very much on the front line in the battle for Black Australia. The theme of the front line movement was 'White Australia calls us radicals, Black Australia calls us freedom fighters'.

Today I reside in the Brisbane suburb of Inala in sunny Queensland, with my wife Rosemary and two children: Samantha aged twelve and Collis aged eleven. Inala is one of those areas made up of state-owned houses. This is as close as we get to clan living today. Of the houses neighbouring us, four are occupied by Murri families. In fact, 1200 Murris live in the three suburbs that make up the area. Murri organisations employ most of the local indigenous population. These organisations include a pre-school, a neighbourhood centre, a resource centre, a family education centre, and a cultural studies

centre. Amongst other off-shoots of these organisations, the area has grown an identity of its own.

I was taught to paint by my mother when I was about twelve. My mother manufactured 21st birthday and wedding cakes. It got to the stage where she was having trouble keeping up with orders – hence the need for me to become involved. Mum worked on the theory that if I could paint, then I would be able to ice and decorate cakes. The theory worked, because no one complained or even knew that I iced a lot of those cakes. The experience stood me in good stead for my own artistic career (as it did for my brother Richard's).

My entrance to the art world was delayed for a short while by my unwillingness to toe the line of Queensland Aboriginal Creations (the Queensland government's retail outlet) who insisted that artists only paint stories they had selected. They had no permission to use stories from Northern Territory and Kimberley region artists, which they stole from books (like some others I know in the culture industry). This retail outlet used to hand out barks to paint, but would not give them to anyone who was unwilling to paint these stories. I felt ill at ease painting someone else's stuff, so I painted weapons. That was eight years ago. We have since rallied support to address these problems. At the end of this paper I will outline some recommendations recently compiled by Queensland Murri artists to tackle government interference and other problems in our industry.

I began my career painting for local Brisbane indigenous artefact manufacturers. This included making and painting many, many returning boomerangs. To this day my favourite surface to work on is a nice smooth piece of wood. I used this period to consolidate my abilities so that I could paint everything to a very high standard. It is common practice for Aboriginal artists all over the country to collaborate on artworks. My local Murri arts community sees being able to paint as 'sharing the load'. One can sit and paint the same boomerangs with other painters. Each painter will pick one of the four colours used – red, black, yellow or white – and work with the others, painting a single colour design until the boomerangs are finished. Having achieved this level, I then

moved toward the fine art arena, where I have worked for the last few years.

In this period my work has combined contemporary and traditional images of self-determination using painting, computer-generated layouts, dioramas with coloured lights, mixed media installations, photographic transparencies, projections and political posters. At the same time I have had to work in an administrative capacity facilitating projects to make sure we had support for those who are struggling and an audience for our art. I am certain that any advances I make in the realms of electronic art will be tempered by my ability to bring our social and political situation to the art audience – and this I cannot do alone. I would like to see many more indigenous artists have the opportunity to extend their media and achieve wider recognition. Perhaps this can happen through collaboration. Our culture has always played down the role of the individual and promoted the group. We must acknowledge group ownership of much of our art, from rock art sites to land rights stories, if our culture is to be acknowledged at all. It follows that from sharing our art we must also share technology.

These last few years have taken me through some very exciting changes, where much more of my time is spent on arts facilitation than on the practical nature of art making. My involvement in arts facilitation has led me to look at ways to speed up the processes of art production. The one way I have been able to achieve this is in the area of electronic art. As well as the underlying cultural forces that lead me, I have a desire to challenge the preconceived parameters of indigenous Australian art. Hence I was pleased to accept the recent invitation to collaborate on a multi-media installation with Richard Bell and Michael Eather for the Ninth Biennale of Sydney (1992/93). Although I would very much like the opportunity to explore the new fields of computer-generated images, animation, laser sculptures and multi-media installation further, there are problems I see that must be overcome before pursuing these new arenas full time.

Firstly, there is a need for decent art education and training to be made available to indigenous artists. There is also an urgent need for constructive support mechanisms for

professional artists to be put in place now. These support strategies must mesh with indigenous art values in a coherent manner. Art institutions will of necessity have to look at ways to remove the shackles of rigid bureaucratic institutionalisation that have held us back. We must be allowed to experience fundamental art training on our own terms and so be allowed the opportunity to explore and experience the many art forms and mediums that are available today. These developments must take place in the true spirit of cooperation, sharing and learning from each other, if we are to fully reach our potential.

The problem with this transitional stage is that we the indigenous artists do not have access to information about what is possible let alone the relevant technology and expertise for producing electronic art. There appears to me to be a perpetration of ignorance by white Australia in withholding information and access, knowingly or unknowingly. For the moment, we seem to be stuck at this point.

This is something that Australia must come to grips with if we are to have a level playing field for the arts and culture. To contextualise this point and to understand why we are working in isolation, it is appropriate to explore what has been happening to the indigenous people over the last two hundred years. You may have heard similar stories before, so I prefer to use the history of my own ancestors, beginning at the period of invasion.

The history of this country through my eyes must surely rank as the worst mass genocide ever perpetrated on any people – including the Jews, the Irish and the Japanese of Hiroshima. There has been a program of blatant and, in more recent times, not so obvious genocide running in this country for over two hundred years. This has changed in shape and form, depending on the level of sophistication adopted by the government.

When the white man came, they made their way to my country on two fronts. The first travelled in boats to the coast of Queensland, where they then travelled inland from the east. The second group came up through the inland river systems from the south. Each was empowered with the knowledge that the doctrine of *terra nullius* was legal, and that there would be no retribution for their actions. The implementation of this dehumanised and now

out-dated law would have been grounds for initiating war crime trials in justice systems anywhere else in the world. But none has ever taken place – not here in the lucky country.

The Jiman people numbered over 2,500 in 1800. In the next 100 years this once proud people were almost totally destroyed. By the mid 1800s the first wave of smallpox hit, killing half the total number of Jiman. Within twenty years a second wave of smallpox killed half the surviving Jiman people, reducing their numbers to about five or six hundred. Despite this decimation, the Jimans also hold the record for the most successful guerrilla war waged against the colonisers by this country's indigenous people at any one time.

Retribution from the white government for these activities was devastating. The native police were brought in and proceeded to massacre an estimated three hundred Jimans. At the same time a relative of the white people who were the target of the Jiman's retaliatory rage, returned from Brisbane and continued the slaughter of some two to three hundred Jimans. When I was researching my ancestry I could find only four women who made it into the 20th century. Of those only three gave birth to any children. Today, the Jimans number around four hundred. If this is evidence of how my people can survive cultural genocide, it makes me wonder what our next step is. Perhaps there is a role for electronic art in cultural practice. If the art of the future is going to be relevant at all then it certainly must take our history into consideration.

The eminent anthropologist Malvaney estimates that in 1770 Australia's population was between 700,000 and 1,000,000. In the mid 1900s the recorded indigenous population hit the low 40,000s. Today we number over 200,000. If you were wondering what became of all the indigenous Australian people, I can tell you that what happened to the Jiman happened to much of Australia, with particular ferocity in the eastern areas of Australia, where the majority of Australian people (black and white) now reside.

If we use Malvaney's figures to estimate what our indigenous population should be today, we would number in the vicinity of millions. We would have our own black government and black opposition. We would have our own black minister for the arts. The

huge amount of funding today being wasted on propping up European art principles and formats for indigenous artists would have gone into making this country's indigenous culture rich and much sought after. This line of thought is often greeted with scorn by white Australia. But it does serve the useful purpose of highlighting the maltreatment and devaluation our culture has suffered. It may bring a line of racist rebukes, but it is really about making Australia face up to the responsibilities of its indigenous population. Australia has not compensated the indigenous people of this country to a just and rightful level. Instead we are forced to endure more racism, quite often resulting in shameful guilt for shameless handouts.

I have said that the genocide perpetrated upon our race has taken different forms at different times. Let me demonstrate how I perceive this has happened and is still happening today – with, I believe, deliberate and calculated attempts at disguise. These actions have a direct influence on our cultural practice, and are worth discussing when we speak of art – in the past, present and future, whether it is rock art, community art or electronic art.

Land has always been the base Aboriginal Australian people have survived on. Take this away and deny access to those areas and you remove the basis of an Aboriginal spirituality. Forcibly introduce other forms of religion while at the same time imposing moral judgment and you will have a devastated people. This has happened to us in the past, and in some parts of Australia these impositions are still being perpetrated. This was further exacerbated by setting up missions and reserves: the indigenous Queenslanders were forcibly removed from their lands and taken away to places like Taroom, Woorabinda and Cherbourg under the paternalistic policy of 'protection'. The effect of this was compounded by threats that if they used their culture (or even spoke their language) they would be sent even further afield to places like Palm Island or Hopevale. Here they were separated from their families, as well as their land, law and language. To the Aboriginals these were places not dissimilar to Nazi concentration camps. The implementation of this policy has led to the present situation where mainstream Australia

and indigenous Australia are culturally poles apart, living in almost total isolation from one another.

When non-Aboriginal people are looking for, say, an indigenous Australian artist to present a lecture or a paper such as this one, they have absolutely no idea where to start or who to ask from the indigenous cultural industry. They cannot possibly know who best serves the needs of a particular agenda, nor expect someone to produce constructive information that has real relevance to the artist of today (beyond expressing their obvious desire to have an Aboriginal presence!). In an industry where large numbers of artists are unemployed, untutored and being denied opportunities, I feel it is vital to develop formats where information can be easily accessed and transferred. Is this in itself a form of electronic art?

Further illustrating this alienation and isolation is the apparent lack of indigenous cultural heroes and role models. The way it is developing, we have non-Aboriginals telling Aboriginals who their heroes should be by choosing those who fit white cultural systems. Aboriginal leaders who have the ability to be cultural heroes have never been given this status by either community. Important Queensland cultural figures from quite recently (let's say the last thirty years), such as Larry Leddie, Willie McKenzie and Arthur Peterson, are sinking further into oblivion as each day passes. If they were born three hundred years ago, these cultural heroes would have been celebrated in song, dance and art.

Do you really think I believe that technology and electronic media of today have not played a role in this cultural genocide? Here we see the sophistication of this two-hundred-year-old genocide changing its shape to accommodate new levels of self righteousness to suit its own requirements. The biggest damage being done to indigenous Australia by the electronic media is the content, or lack of it. Within the circulation of mass media information, this has the effect of stealing our children's hearts and minds. Today the heroes and icons that are being manufactured for them have not one iota of relevance to us.

The health of the indigenous Australian is another example. Why have we as a race not

been warned of the problems that go with a changeover from a nomadic lifestyle to that of the present? Please do not insult my intelligence by saying that the colonisers did not know what these changes meant. This change of lifestyle, foods and eating habits, have given us a tremendous number of health problems, with many of our people not living past forty, or our children not surviving their early months. I wonder about those people who live in remote areas with little or no access to mainstream information services and centres. Are they aware that this is happening to them? If we had access to electronic media to construct our messages and stories, surely we would be commenting on these issues. Perhaps the art generated from electronic media might actually communicate to the visually literate art world and give focus to these issues.

It seems to me that the administrative work involved in facilitating projects and large-scale mixed media collaborations is just as important as painting boomerangs and canvases. The necessity of working to develop a support structure that will redress Queensland's history of deliberate suppression of indigenous culture has become apparent to me in the last two years. Investigations into this area, including a proposal for a computerised data base and image bank for indigenous artists, has resulted in the first Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Visual Artists Conference held at Yarrabah Aboriginal community. From this conference came 31 recommendations and support strategies initiated by a large group of artists. They included funding, education, marketing and legal strategies. I would like to present some of those that are possibly relevant here:

- That state and federal education departments implement ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) art education and support programs across all levels, eg pre-school to post-graduate studies. This would include artists in schools, artists in residencies, workshops, murals, commissions etc.
- That state and federal educational institutions implement more ATSI courses, especially arts awareness programs throughout the state in consultation with QICVA (our elected statewide artists management committee) and their respective regional communities.
- That a series of seminars take place between the relevant educational and cultural bodies to help facilitate the cultural needs of those regions.
- That ATSI and DEET provide the necessary funds required for QICVA in their educational up-grading to appropriately advise, support and coordinate their respective regions. This includes computer courses, data basing skills, photography skills, report writing and funding submissions, knowledge of art history, art theory etc.
- That DEET relinquish to QICVA all responsibilities, including funding arrangements and screening processes, with respect to all training courses, workshops and educational activities involving Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Arts and Crafts. This is to ensure a coordinated program of arts training is taking place in regional Queensland within the established ATSI network.
- That art educational bodies recognise Aboriginal artists with experience, expertise and qualifications on similar levels as that of a diploma and other academic levels.
- That QICVA make application to the federal government to ban the importation of cultural properties identified as those belonging to the indigenous people of this country. This would include Aboriginal art, artefacts, boomerangs, woomeras, fabric designs etc.
- That QICVA make application to the federal government for Queensland ATSI artists to have access to museum collections world-wide concerning matters of cultural heritage. This includes skeletal remains, paintings, photographs, artefacts, and other cultural properties relevant to their origins. Return of this property world-wide at the expense of the federal government.
- That current restrictions imposed on the use of traditional materials involving the cultural practice of Queensland ATSI artists be lifted. This would include: to collect a limited number of turtle shells for

art works from food gathering, emu eggs, porcupine quills, certain bird feathers etc.

- Copyright: That a simple publication and accompanying video be prepared outlining moral rights, artists rights and copyright restrictions for artists. This would be done in conjunction with QICVA, Aboriginal Artists Management Association, Queensland Artworkers Alliance and the Arts Law Centre and be widely distributed amongst artists in Queensland.
- That the state and federal governments recognise group ownership of artwork. This would include rock art, boomerang design and significant cultural property etc. This also applies to artwork on land areas where indigenous groups of people have been removed.

I believe that indigenous art and culture can now tackle all these health, social and political problems from a very different angle.

In a recent mock collage painting my brother, Richard Bell, created the ironic media headline 'South Africa Leads Call For Sanctions Against Australia'. Will it indeed take sanctions to get Australia back into the

Black? Should Aboriginal people comment upon these issues in the processes of contemporary art? If so, what possibilities do the electronic media hold? Surely we can talk about our economy and our education. We are the landowners! While most Australian politicians are busy trying to save us with welfare handouts and an obsolete education system, I would like to think I am out there instilling in the indigenous people a desire to live. The only way I can achieve this is through cultural practice, and my art is central to this. Our culture, unlike that of white Australians, is the way we come to our spirituality. It is the way we come to our decisions and it is the way we arrive at our self being. We do not take our culture lightly.

Marshall Bell began his career painting Aboriginal artefacts and now combines contemporary and traditional means to present images of Aboriginal self-determination and culture. He has been involved in numerous educational workshops, conferences and commissions in support of indigenous Australian art and artists. He is currently Co-Director of the Campfire Consultancy in Brisbane.

historical references, first-hand encounters, and theoretical projections. In the search for new forms of interfacing, we refer to *STRING CYCLES*, a hypermedia work-in-progress by Peter d'Agostino. Its voice represents the nature of our discussion on the subject of orality and literacy and the nature of the techno-cultural interface. A mix of stories and descriptions, the methodology of this presentation will incorporate some trace of the methods under discussion. Here, we present a dialogue, a metalogue (Bateson 1972) on these issues.

In the small mining community of Coober Pedy in the centre of South Australia, a transplanted Croatian philosopher named Ivan Radeka maintains an underground hostel for overnight wayfarers en route along the Stuart Highway. Meeting the bus in the middle of the night, Ivan Radeka escorts his guests to their subterranean quarters. The following day, he leads a tour over scarred earth through a post-industrial wasteland of rusted machine parts and mechanical skeletons, out beyond the edge of town to the sacred mounts and the limitless expanse of an enchanted forest and an ancient sea. Later, Radeka invites his guests to a discussion of the physical-spiritual, phenomenological interface between post-apocalyptic environments, between dreams and reality, between knowledge and ignorance.

Over the more than thirty-five years he has spent living in Coober Pedy, Ivan Radeka has assembled a discourse on the conjunction of time and space that comes from Aboriginal people, from the desert, from the geology and engineering principles guiding the regional mining of opal, and from a knowledge of mathematics and physics. With a mix of humility and certainty, Ivan Radeka's philosophy posits the logic of balance in an expanding-contracting universe, the life force in the expanding-contracting lungs of a breathing individual, the threshold between energy and matter. Radeka describes a 'zero point', marking a navigational conception site where a body-world correlation may begin.

Ivan Radeka – an oral poet, a composer of tales – embodies the storyteller. His carefully calculated logic weaves together a lifetime of references for interested listeners to question, to challenge, to assimilate and discard at will. Radeka's contact with his guests blunts the

electronic age described by Walter J Ong, the 'age of secondary orality'. Ivan Radeka's orality builds from his direct contact with his visitor(s) and branches according to that immediate interaction.

Analogous to the energy released from a burning object, when a human being ('no more than a compilation of dust') begins to think, that individual stretches into the fourth dimension (an awareness of time). Recognising the state of these energy-matter relations does not, however, in and of itself, represent a transcendental leap of consciousness. The temporal fulcrum of the physical universe is only the embarkation point for pursuing truth; where an infinite future meets an infinite past; where an endless landscape meets a limitless horizon, marking the zero point on the path toward enlightenment.

According to Radeka, the Aboriginal people know this better than the Europeans. Certain members of all human tribes operate in the fourth dimension, but few individuals know how to locate their zero point. The necessity of preserving certain native cultures 'telepathically' in touch with their temporal status, the necessity of preserving those tribes in the context of a larger universe, becomes clear. The task embraces a wide spectrum of concerns.

In a contracting world with an expanding human population, formulating a concept of balance and working to sustain it marks the pivotal challenge. Unfortunately, the homogenised world culture has little trace of indigenous earth-bound identity. The prognosis, usually bleak when it comes to saving the earth's environment, provides one rationale for populating the new frontier of space.

Instead of a bleak future with a homogenised and pervasive high-tech culture, maybe a new orality can be developed to connect high-tech and traditional cultures by using voice-activated computers? The proposal assumes an acceptance of the disruption in continuity associated with current post-industrial schizo-culture, as opposed to looking for a utopian restoration of the past.

'Dismembering may be a prelude to remembering, which is not merely restoring some past intact but setting it in